FORE-CLOSED Between Crisis and Possibility

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investigation of everyday interaction and experience and a testing ground for models of social organization. By doing so, the project addresses the silenced unseen and negotiates, from a cultural perspective, the political construction of what or who is visible. This analysis excavates a notion of invisibility as parallel to the term *foreclosure*. Invisibility is understood not only as a lens of the subjective but also as a useful framework for viewing the use of power and exclusion within cultural processes.

Immigrant Movement International

Tania Bruguera's project *Immigrant Movement International* seeks to bring to public discussion and, more importantly, to political debate, a notion of immigrants as an identity-based category, which, beyond national denominations, encompasses a rapidly growing number of individuals and groups across the globe. The artist states, "Immigrants are the social class par excellence in the twenty-first century. A social class in search of its identity in its differences and for a voice with which to set forth their knowledge and demands."[1] For Bruguera, the *IMI* project explores new models to visualize and test forms of political representation for immigrants who "are endowed with a strong but invisible political presence."[2] What is more, Bruguera seeks to consider "the bargaining between what is visible and what is sub-visible, between the impossibility of ignoring their presence and the clear decision of obviating it, between what is political and what is worldly."[3]

Although first conceived in 2006, this endeavor began its realization in January of 2011 under the auspices of Creative Time, a New York-based nonprofit, and the Queens Museum of Art. For this residency, Bruguera moved into a house in a multinational, residential area of Corona, Queens, where she set up a storefront as the headquarters of the Movement. Her decision to locate herself in an actual neighborhood allows Bruguera, in her own words, "to remain immersed and concentrated in

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How can we learn to look deep into each other's eyes and to recognize the complex spectrum of feelings that the Other provokes within us? If we succeed in recognizing this complexity and difficulty, as well as the affects provoked by the prohibited, the different, and the intolerable, can we then talk about them as previously foreclosed? Is that even possible? When thinking of this operation among individuals, and then among different social groups, might we speak of foreclosed identities? And, finally, is there a means of addressing those who have been foreclosed?

This essay focuses on the work *Immigrant Movement International (IMI)* (2011–), a long-term project currently in its first year of development by the artist Tania Bruguera, and delves into the concept of staging in order to analyze how the artist deals discursively and practically with notions of political visibility and invisibility. The *IMI* project constructs a direct negotiation with political and social organizations, and investigates the perception, recognition, and representation of immigrants by means of an artist-initiated, sociopolitical movement. The purpose of my inquiry is to examine the strategies with which Bruguera seeks to create spaces for public discussion and political transformation. With the *IMI*, she establishes a field of

Tania Bruguera, *Useful Art Association* logo.
Dimensions variable. Courtesy Studio Bruguera

Tania Bruguera, *Generic Capitalism*, 2009. Performance. © Tania Bruguera.
Photograph by Rainer Ganahl; courtesy Studio Bruguera

the development of the project." The project, so far, has initiated a series of what Bruguera refers to as "actions"; that is, workshops and events for the public, which provide different platforms or stages to work with immigrants to analyze and discuss issues of visibility over the course of a year. In addition to organizing these events, Bruguera's activities range from physically setting up the headquarters and maintaining a daily work schedule to contacting community leaders and scheduling sessions with local political advisors. To establish connections and an ongoing dialogue with the local community, Bruguera shares a room in her new home with local families, allowing her to further uncover the issues facing immigrants and to help inform the future development of the project.

Bruguera frames this project in the context of "Useful Art" (Arte Útil), which has been a guiding principle for her practice in recent years. With this concept, she intends to investigate "the implementation of art in society, . . . addressing the disparity of engagement between informed audiences and the general public, as well as the historical gap between the language used in what is considered avant-garde and the language of urgent politics."[4] As critic Claire Bishop explains, "for Bruguera, useful art denotes a conjunction of political action and illegality— understood here as pushing against the boundaries of what those in power define as legal and acceptable, and being willing to embrace the criminal if necessary—so that art might achieve something in the social field (be this civil liberties or cultural politics), as well as taking a position within the long history of such artistic gestures."[5]

With the *IMI*, Bruguera intends to avoid a final outcome or product, and to recognize the overall process as part of the open articulation of this initiative. Nevertheless, a set of media-focused elements integrated into the project aim to provide an ongoing register throughout its development: a website will supply general information about the organization's objectives and activities, and the artist will post her working diary on a blog. Each of these activities proposes a different approach to reading,

informing, and interacting; each connects with and provides for different audiences. Together, they offer different ways of making the project public, visible, and accessible; that is to say, they constitute various forms of staging.

Staging as a Strategy

With a background in performance-based practices, Bruguera has used her body as the focus of her early pieces. In the last decade, she has created a series of recurring works that involve staged situations, or, as she terms them "contexts." From its general definition, *staging* is understood as an instance of organizing a public event or protest.[6] It is also a term most commonly associated with theater and the performing arts. It is apparent that the *IMI* incorporates some of Bruguera's previous skills and experiences on the "stage." To make visible tensions produced by a state of invisibility, Bruguera has utilized public events to stage interactions and enable conversations.[7] In several other of her recent proposals, staged situations have taken the form of panel discussions, such as *Generic Capitalism* (2009); press conference events, as in *Autosabotage* (2009); speech scenarios, as in *Tatlin's Whisper #6* (2009); and public encounters that test audience reactions to a set of provocations, as was the case in *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008). As Carrie Lambert-Beatty has written: "her craft is confrontation."[8] Following the structure of these earlier projects, *Immigrant Movement International* deliberately names not only its objectives but also its audiences.

When examining the *IMI* in terms of its staging of moments, spaces, and actions, it is useful to recall other resonant attempts within the theatrical field. Drawing from the tradition of Brazilian popular theater, Augusto Boal developed the *Legislative Theatre*, a theatrical form conceived to intervene in Rio de Janeiro's political processes. Boal wrote that particular Brazilian popular theater traditions were created "from the popular
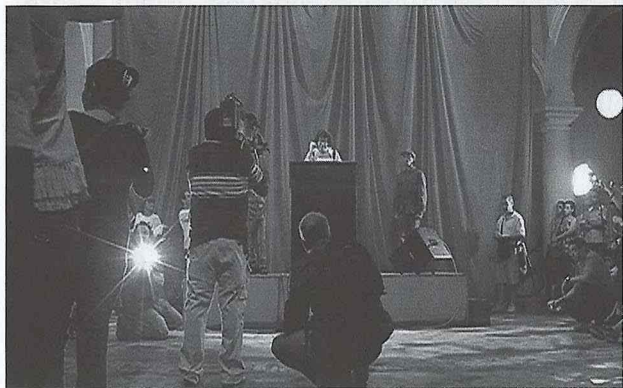
Tania Bruguera, still from *Tatlin's Whisper #6*, 2009 (performance view, Havana version). © Tania Bruguera; courtesy Studio Bruguera
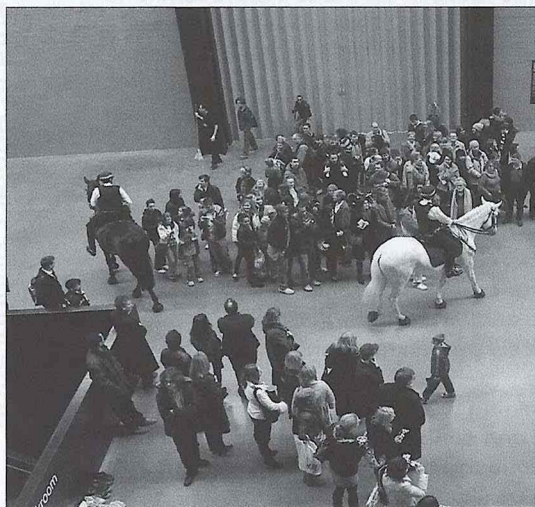
Tania Bruguera, *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, 2008 (performance view, UBS Openings: Live—The Living Currency). Performance. Photograph by Sheila Burnett; courtesy Tate Modern

perspective but aimed at another audience."[9] He states, "Our mandate's project is to bring theatre back into the centre of political action—the centre of decisions— by making theatre as politics rather than merely making political theatre. In the latter case, the theatre makes comments on politics; in the former, the theatre is, in itself, one of the ways in which political activity can be conducted."[10] Following this historical description, it seems pertinent to question if the *IMI* is currently attempting a similar operation. In a kindred vein, Bruguera has commented: "the point of view of the piece is from the perspective of the immigrants even when the target audience is the elected officials."[11] Furthermore, she expresses: "I would like with the project to help change the negative image of immigrants in order to create new ways for them to achieve social recognition."[12] This utopian drive functions as an engine for this particular project, as well as for Tania Bruguera's life practice as a whole.

Bruguera's instigating role in this ambitious artistic venture is reminiscent of what Boal refers to as the dream of theater artists: "We require the spectator to verify the existence of the show: in the dream, the spectator is the dreamer him- or her-self [sic]. More than 'watching' the dream, the dreamer is, at the same time his or her own dramaturg, director, lead actor, sound operator: an accumulation of functions which is every theatre artist's dream. . . ."[13] One of the core dimensions of the *IMI*'s development is Bruguera's own active participation at every stage, including: her moving to Queens; living in a family house; meeting neighbors; collaborating with political and cultural organizations alike; setting up an office; occupying the space regularly; answering the phone; publishing on Facebook; communicating through Twitter; writing the *IMI* blog. The central question to be asked vis-à-vis the *IMI* is how Bruguera's "dream"—her discursive principles, planned activities, as well as her meticulous registration of both—will successfully cohabitate with the dreams of her intended audiences.

Interrogating Visibility and Foreclosure

While staging invokes visibility by delivering recognition to the audience it addresses, the question of that which remains invisible is ever present. Despite the participation of some people, others remain offstage. Moreover, in this representation, certain things are necessarily fore-grounded, while others are omitted. When perceived, some aspects of the Other can be registered, while other parts are neglected. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has sharply insisted, loss is inevitably part of all encounters.[14] This bears upon not only the *IMI* but also the overarching framework of the exhibition within which this instantiation of the Movement is represented. It is therefore important to reflect upon the consequences, contradictions, and paradoxes integral to ideas of visibility.

The notion of the Other—and of ourselves—is constructed through daily social interactions and loaded with the imbalance of power and powerlessness. Perspectives are formed based on how individuals address and regard one another, by what they choose to recognize and *not* to recognize. It is through the act of speaking and generating dialogue that we begin to understand how we stand in relation to the Other. The process of imagining the social is framed in political structures that separate groups from one another. Power relationships are at the core of defining which values are acknowledged within a collective imaginary and which are excluded.[15] Among the many different activities in which the social is constructed, the act of speech is a means of inscribing identity. How and where we situate ourselves determines the ways in which we establish a relationship with those we intend to speak to. Charles Taylor states "the mode of address says something about the footing we stand on with our address-ees." Taylor goes on to say that the way in which we address other people can be a loaded, somewhat violent act: "the action is forceful; it is meant to impress, perhaps even to threaten certain consequences if our message is not heard. But it is also meant to persuade; it remains

this side of violence. It figures the addressee as one who can be, must be, reasoned with."[16] Therefore, among the essential processes in which the imaginary is constituted, the act of addressing others plays a fundamental role. This occurs within the public sphere, the field where visibility is negotiated; and, by comparison, the field in which the effect of invisibility is exercised.

What is not acknowledged in a field of representation may also be referred to as foreclosed. Although it is by no means an equivalent relationship, there is a link between what is invisible and what is foreclosed. One of the many ways in which the term *foreclosure* is explained is "a withdrawal of significance—a refusal to lend meaning to what is perceived."[17] That is, to take away the symbolic value of something or someone experienced. As a psychoanalytic term, *foreclosure* is a subjective process related to psychosis. However, in addition to this definition, the meaning can be elaborated in terms of similar processes that occur between individuals. Consider forms of social interaction in which specific groups refuse to lend meaning to each other. Foreclosure may be a useful term to describe a cultural process. If so, we would need to observe the relationship between what is perceived and recognized as visible, and what is rejected, or made invisible. Furthermore, the term can be applied to the interaction between groups within a shared context that either acknowledge or refuse each other.

In political terms, the negotiation of representation involves an operation in which the visible and the invisible compete for a privileged position—the first, by exercising power, and, the second, by claiming it. It is important to acknowledge the complexity of this relationship and particularly to recognize the flawed expectation that these positions can somehow become equal. We must then understand that it is not only a matter of simply granting inclusiveness, lending visibility to the invisible, which is in itself problematic, but to recognize the richness of the encounter between these positions and the importance of the address itself. In other words, visibility cannot become

total; something will always remain invisible and thus foreclosed for all of the involved parties. Nevertheless, instigating an encounter is undoubtedly necessary. In this regard, the *IMI* is an ambitious experiment.

Summary: The Show and the Dream[18]

Some of the questions posed throughout this essay, as well as in following paragraphs, may be answered only with the passage of time. As of the writing of this text, the *IMI* project is still in its embryonic phase and no public events have yet transpired, leaving many questions presented in this essay open. They can thus be perceived as an interrogatory road map for future developments. By raising these questions, a critical framework for understanding the developments of the *Immigrant Movement International* and its outreach has been established. It is my hope that these questions will be revisited throughout the project, as well as retroactively, with the clarity that temporal distance can provide. The following questions, for which I have attempted some tentative responses, are intended for this purpose.

Given the multiplicity of modes of outreach, how can one develop a complex understanding of the spatial and temporal matrix of the *IMI*? A multilayered and networked structure provides a constantly changing frame within which activities are deliberately continuous, thereby resisting classification. It is important to consider at this early stage whether a systematic registration of all of the projects' components succeed in providing a holistic understanding of the project in its entirety. In some of Bruguera's past works, documentation has been avoided as the material referent of an action or event.[19]

For whom is this project intended? It is clear that the audience is conceived not as an external vantage point but as an integral component of the *IMI*. For the events taking place in the Movement's headquarters in Queens, workers, neighbors, and other local people are cast as the

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of art is the path and the link between one dream and the other."[20] As I have suggested, foreclosure, like the process of rendering invisible, is inherent to social relations and therefore cannot be prevented. Nevertheless, as I have also proposed, it is a process that demands ongoing examination and critique. In this vein, the purpose of *Immigrant Movement International* might be to stage a dream of visibility—one that temporarily and incompletely but by necessity confronts the waking life of foreclosure.

1 Tania Bruguera, "Ideas of My Work: Immigrant Movement International" (working document, New York City, 2011).

2 Tania Bruguera, "Immigrant Movement International" (working document, early project statement, 2010).

3 Ibid.

4 Tania Bruguera, *Immigrant Movement International*, press release, presented by Creative Time and the Queens Museum of Art, New York City, March 23, 2011, http://www.queensmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/bruguera-immigrant-movement-international-release1.pdf (accessed March 26, 2011).

5 Claire Bishop, "Speech Disorder: Claire Bishop on Tania Bruguera at the 10th Havana Biennial," *Artforum*, Summer 2009, 121–122.

6 "An instance of organizing a public event or protest." The Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. "staging," http://oxford-dictionaries.com/view/entry/m_en_us1293741#m_en_us1293741 (accessed March 26, 2011).

7 Bishop, 121–122.

8 Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Political People: Notes on Arte de Conducta," *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary* (Milan: Charta, 2009), 37–45.

9 Augusto Boal, *Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to Make Politics*, trans. Adrian Jackson (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 222.

10 Ibid., 20.

11 Bruguera, "Ideas of My Work: Immigrant Movement International."

12 Ibid.

13 Boal, 189.

14 When explaining the notion of "the exceptional subaltern," Spivak presents the sense of loss that is inherent to the process of translation from one cultural context to the other; the loss exists for both sides. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and The Interpretation of Culture.* Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. (London: Macmillan, 1988).

15 Philosopher Charles Taylor uses the term *social imaginary* to approach the construction of perception between individuals, and how perception is expressed. "By social imaginary. . . . I am thinking . . . of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations." Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

16 Ibid.

17 J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1967), 166–169.

18 Chapter title taken from: Augusto Boal, *Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to Make Politics*, trans. by Adrian Jackson (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 187.

19 For *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008), in the commission agreement with Tate Modern, the artist established that documentation of the piece would be made, owned, and circulated freely by any person.

20 Boal, 187.

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